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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#) [OSCE](#)

SUBJECT: GOT INTIMIDATION FORCES CANCELLATION OF  
UNIVERSITY-SPONSORED CONFERENCE ON ARMENIAN QUESTION

REF: ANKARA 1841

(U) Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons E.O.  
12958 1.4 (b and d).

1. (U) This is a joint Ankara-Istanbul cable.

2. (C) Summary: Under accusations of treason by GOT and other political leaders, and the threat of prosecution, Bogazici University officials announced May 24 their last-minute decision to cancel a conference at which independent-minded intellectuals were scheduled to speak on the massacre of Armenians in 1915. Justice Minister Cicek and an opposition MP harshly condemned those who organized the conference, as did the Higher Education Council. An Istanbul prosecutor began an investigation of the event. Some University faculty members fired back with a statement criticizing the GOT for its "attack on free expression." EU contacts say the GOT's actions have further eroded Turkey's image in Europe. The incident is the latest example of resurgent nationalism and anti-reform backlash in Turkey since the December EU Summit. End Summary.

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Conference Canceled Under Threats  
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3. (U) Following rhetorical attacks by Justice Minister Cicek and others, State-owned Bogazici (Bosphorus) University announced its last-minute decision to "postpone" a conference on "Ottoman Armenians During the Collapse of the Empire: Scholarly Responsibility and Problems of Democracy." The conference, scheduled to take place May 25-27, held the promise of a more open discussion than Turkey has seen before on the massacre of Anatolian Armenians in 1915. The conference was jointly organized by Bogazici, Sabanci, and Bilgi universities and was scheduled to take place at the Bogazici campus in Istanbul.

4. (C) As reported reftel, the GOT is engaged in an uncompromising public relations campaign to "prove" the Ottomans did not commit genocide against Armenians. Various one-sided events have been organized for the purpose of spreading the official view. For instance, Justin McCarthy, an American demography professor whose backing of the official Turkish position has won him decades of support from the Turkish State, was given the red-carpet treatment in March when he addressed Parliament and a university audience with speeches, laced with strong anti-EU undertones, dismissing the genocide allegations.

5. (U) The Bogazici University event, by contrast, would have included several critics of the official view among its list of about two dozen speakers. These included Fethiye Cetin, author of "My Grandmother" ("Anneannem"), a biography of a young Armenian girl caught up in the slaughter of 1915, forcibly taken in by a Turkish family and forcibly converted to Islam (reftel); Halil Berktaay, a Sabanci University professor who has written that the tragedy of 1915 contains many elements of genocide; Turkey's foremost liberal (in the classic sense) columnist Ismet Berkan; and Ankara University leftist-gadfly professor Baskin Oran, who has frequently criticized the official State position. Many of the other scheduled speakers were academics not considered controversial.

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Justice Minister Calls Event "Stab in the Back"  
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6. (U) Cicek, who also serves as GOT spokesman, implied during his harsh remarks before Parliament May 24 that the conference constituted treason. Cicek asserted that the conference was "a stab in the back of the Turkish nation" because it would undermine GOT efforts to "silence" Armenian genocide allegations. "Universities are autonomous, but this does not mean that they are exempted from responsibility," he explained. In a rare display of political unity, Sukru Elekdag, MP from the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), labeled the conference "treason" and said the event would serve as academic cover for "Armenian propaganda."

7. (U) Cicek also opined that the Higher Education Council

(YOK) should take action against conference organizers. YOK promptly responded with a statement declaring that the organizers' stated goal of airing views contrary to the official position proved that the event "cannot be a scholarly meeting." YOK concluded that "such an effort by a Turkish university is unfortunate for Turkish higher education."

18. (U) The Istanbul Chief Prosecutor, according to press reports, started preparing to build a case against conference organizers the day before the event was set to begin, sending a notice to Bogazici University officials requesting transcripts and other conference documents.

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Intellectuals Strike Back  
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19. (U) Some Turkish intellectuals -- but relatively few -- have sharply protested. A group of 109 Bogazici faculty members, mostly untenured and thus all the more courageous, released a statement May 25 condemning the assault on the conference. In the statement, the faculty members describe the comments of Cicek and others as "an attack on freedom of expression." The faculty members further state that they would like the conference to be re-scheduled as soon as possible, and declare that they are "embarrassed that (Cicek) bears the title of Justice Minister." The History Foundation of Turkey issued a statement calling the cancellation "an undeniable defeat and a dark moment in Turkey's experience in democracy." Yusuf Alatas, president of the Human Rights Association, told us he is planning to issue a joint statement with the Helsinki Citizens Assembly calling on Cicek to resign. Murat Belge, a Bilgi University professor who helped organize the conference, stated that the president of Bogazici, while good, is inexperienced and may have been unwilling to resist pressure. Bilge claimed he and his colleagues would try again to hold the event, probably in the fall.

110. (C) A number of columnists also harshly criticized the GOT. Turk-Islam synthesist Taha Akyol, of Milliyet, and liberal Asli Aydintasbas, of Sabah -- two of Turkey's largest-circulation dailies -- averred that it was Cicek who stabbed Turkey in the back by taking a hard-line approach that will only enhance international sympathy for genocide allegations and erode Turkey's international standing. Berkan, a columnist for the daily Radikal, told us May 25 that the attack on the conference reflects the fact that leaders of the ruling AK Party do not support, or even understand, Western human rights concepts. The GOT has adopted EU-related legal reforms, but not out of a sincere commitment to making Turkey more democratic, he said. Berkan expressed deep regret that his alma mater Bogazici University, "the most liberal state university in Turkey," gave in to intimidation. In his May 26 column, he wrote that the cancellation "was a turning point in terms of academic autonomy and freedom in Turkey."

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Diplomats: Another Setback for EU Candidacy  
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111. (C) A German diplomat told us Cicek's comments were the worst he'd seen by a GOT official during his three years in Ankara. "This shows that the Turkish Government no longer cares about EU standards," he said. "It's all about Turkish politics and staying in power now." The German Ambassador, on hearing of Cicek's remarks, told us that he immediately put a call through to the Minister and asked him if he understood how profoundly significant it was that the German Ambassador was calling (i.e., implying that Cicek's stab-in-the-back remark is redolent of proto-Nazi language from the Munich beerhalls). Cicek did not. Other EU diplomats concurred that the conference cancellation is seen in Europe as yet another setback in Turkey's EU candidacy.

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MFA Tries to Downplay Incident  
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112. (C) We discussed the issue with Asip Kaya, of the MFA Security Affairs office, which follows the "genocide" issue. Kaya nervously asserted that the conference was not canceled due to GOT pressure. He claimed he personally would have preferred to see the conference proceed as scheduled, but asserted that organizers failed to include diverse viewpoints among participants. He tried to assure us that Turks are free to express their views about the events of 1915, although he could not cite an event where views contrary to the official position had been presented.

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Comment  
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113. (C) A mainstay of the GOT's policy on the Armenian

genocide allegations has been the argument that the issue should be handled by historians. This is a rational position, but the GOT has always been disingenuous in its approach. In 2003, the Education Ministry issued a memo urging schools across the country to have fifth- and seventh-graders write an essay explaining why the genocide allegations are "baseless." Fifth- and seventh-graders are not historians, but apparently that doesn't matter since the government is providing them with a pre-ordained conclusion.

14. (C) PM Erdogan is fond of demonstrating the GOT's supposed willingness to "leave it to historians" by claiming that Turkey's archives are "open" and challenging the Armenians to open theirs as well. As reported reftel, the GOT employs an Orwellian definition of "open," similar to Cicek's above-noted concept of academic autonomy. There are tight restrictions, including a special visa requirement for foreigners, and only the "catalogued" archives can be reviewed.

15. (C) This assault on free speech fits into the broader backlash against EU reforms since the December Summit. In the current climate of resurgent nationalism and doubts about Turkey's EU prospects, the GOT has panicked and wrapped itself in a defensive, nationalist-Islamist cloak. In that context, MPs reviewing the now-passed Penal Code have left intact language in the legal reasoning of article 305 that would appear to punish the expression of views contrary to State policy on Cyprus and the Armenian massacres. Though various contacts had assured us the controversial language would be removed, MPs did not do so as they passed the law on May 27.

16. (C) Moreover, the Bogazici University conference was not the only human rights-related event the GOT canceled at the last minute this week. The Justice Ministry on May 24 canceled a seminar for doctors on the treatment of torture victims. The event, organized in cooperation with the European Commission, was set to begin the next morning, and participants from London learned of the cancellation only when they arrived at their Istanbul hotel.

17. (C) And there is more bad news to come. Our EU contacts say the May 25 decision by the High Court of Appeals for the closure of the Egitim-Sen teachers' union will prove more damaging than the cancellation of the conference. Under the ruling, the GOT will close Egitim-Sen unless the union removes from its statute an article supporting the right of citizens to be educated in their mother tongue. Our contacts say teachers' unions in Europe are concerned about the case and will press their governments to raise the issue with the GOT. We will report septel on the case.

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